

Wacana, Vol. 12 No. 2 (October 2010): 369–385

INAUGURAL LECTURE

Climate and culture

Changes, lessons, and challenges¹

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Inaugural Lecture, 4 March 2010
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ABSTRACT

From generation to generation over the centuries, people in all parts of the world have developed adaptive social-cultural institutions and strategies of natural resource management based on the intimate relationship they had with their environment. At present, recent global warming is threatening people's lives. Unfortunately, climate change is a natural phenomenon which is neither easy to observe, nor to predict and anticipate accurately. In many places, local people can no longer rely on earlier experiences and existing socio-cultural institutions to adjust to unprecedented changes. We are in urgent need of specific efforts to re-interpret and enrich our knowledge of this natural phenomenon. However, this is not an easy thing to do. People from all kinds of levels and entities in society are simultaneously the cause and the victims of global warming. The problem becomes even more complicated because of various mutually-affecting dimensions like ethics, politics, power, economics, and justice. These are the ultimate challenges scholars of the social sciences and humanities need to address seriously everywhere in the world, including in Indonesia. This article addresses the arguments of what scholars in the social sciences and humanities could

¹ This article is a revised English version of a paper the author presented in the Award Ceremony and Scientific Paper Presentation of The First Academy Professor in Social Sciences and Humanities at Universitas Indonesia on 4 March 2010. Yunita T. Winarto is appointed to hold the chair of the Academy Professorship Indonesia in Social Sciences and Humanities under the auspices of the The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the Indonesian Academy of Sciences (Akademi Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia, AIP) with Universitas Indonesia as the host university for the period of September 2009 - September 2011. The original scientific paper presented in Indonesian was published in the award-book: *Award Ceremony and Scientific Paper Presentation: Climate and Culture: Changes, Lessons, and Challenges (Iklim dan Budaya: Perubahan, Pelajaran, dan Tantangan)*. Depok: Universitas Indonesia, 4 March 2010, www.ui.ac.id.

and should do in response to climate change. Promoting a new paradigm and ethics in dealing with climate change is urgent and improvements in approaches and research methodologies are necessary. Learning from experiences gained from the way farmers in Java respond to climate change, the author argues that interdisciplinary research across social and natural sciences, and collaborative work with target groups is a promising and significant step (although scholars will have to face many challenges and constraints).

KEYWORDS

Climate change, ethics, the roles of social sciences and humanities, interdisciplinary research, collaborative ethnography, Science Field Shop.

When I was carrying out my ethnographic fieldwork in Wareng, Gunungkidul, Yogyakarta in 2007, my research team members and I were acquainted with the state's programs to advance farmers' knowledge of the weather and the climate in a so-called Climate Field School (*Sekolah Lapangan Iklim*). As many as 20 male and female farmers participated in the school. They were grateful for the government's effort to assist them to understand the nature of, and changes in, the weather and the climate, and the implications they have on their fields and crops. They followed each session seriously. Throughout the learning period and its follow-up, I noticed a gradual increase in their knowledge and saw them modify their farming strategies following recommendations from the facilitator. At the same time, various parties are struggling to keep up with the climate changes and their consequences on the planet and on people's lives. The world is becoming warmer and life is becoming more uncomfortable. This situation means for some people the creation of "life and death" especially for people whose life depends on the day-to-day weather condition affecting their natural resource strategies. This situation inspires me as a social-scientist and anthropologist, to engage in self-reflection. As a scholar dealing with people's lives, how can I close my eyes to the people's struggle to survive on an earth that is getting warmer and warmer and becoming unprecedentedly vulnerable? How can I move on in such a situation? What kinds of opportunities and potentials may people develop in response to climate change? How, as a scholar, can I help them?

CULTURE AND CLIMATE: A DIALECTICS

Climate change is a natural phenomenon, yet various scholars claim that anthropogenic factors significantly contribute to the problem (*The Britannica Guide* 2008: 4; also see Crate and Nuttal 2009: 10-11):

[...] anthropogenic factors (those originating in human activity) are responsible for most of the current global warming, with the radiative forcing from anthropogenic sources being over ten times larger than that from all natural components combined. The primary anthropogenic source is the emission of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, which is produced mainly by the burning of fossil fuels.

The burning of fossil fuels, and the emission of methane contributes to the emission of greenhouse gases (Stigter in his communication with farmers in Gunungkidul, Yogyakarta 2007). As cited by Ikawati (2010), FAO reports say that methane is the most dominant gas emanating from the agricultural and